

<p>Washburn Lake/Palmer Mountain Improvements Environmental Assessment #OR134-EA-02-007 Wenatchee Resource Area, Spokane District</p>
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Introduction

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposes road and recreational improvements at Washburn Lake and Palmer Mountain, located within 38 miles of Omak and 18 miles of Oroville (see map). Washburn Lake and Palmer Mountain are in Okanogan County in northeastern Washington, within the Okanogan Management Area of the Wenatchee Resource Area, Spokane BLM District. Proposed road improvements include road reshaping, drainage installation, and adding more gravel. Recreational improvements include improving the parking and camping area near Washburn Lake, creating a new parking area and access point along the north road (road 7819027R0000), improving directional signing, and closing off unauthorized vehicle access points.

Purpose and Need

The BLM acquired land in the Washburn Lake vicinity in 1995, and since that time public use has steadily increased. Visitor records show a 150% increase in only a one-year time period (from 2,000 visitors in the year 2000 to 5,000 visitors in 2001). Although BLM has done some maintenance on the road, the increasing level of public use coupled with environmental conditions have resulted in rutted, eroding and unsafe road conditions. Visitors have been avoiding bumpy and wet places by driving their vehicles around them, creating a network of additional unauthorized roads and further widening the existing roadway. In addition, visitors have been driving around BLM barricades to access closed areas, creating additional roads and management difficulties.

Improved road access is needed to facilitate management of the public lands by BLM employees for grazing lease management, weed control operations, and administrative needs. It will also provide safe and improved access for grazing lessees, miners, and the recreating public.

Extensive road and drainage improvements would ensure visitors stayed on the main access road.

Placing gates and other heavy barricades at these locations would prevent vehicle access into these areas. Problems with unauthorized public vehicle access along the north road (road 7819027R0000) would be managed by creating a small parking area and placing a heavy gate near the existing fence line north of the corral where the road closure can be enforced.

The BLM manages several grazing leases in the Washburn Lake/Palmer Mountain vicinity. The main unimproved camping area near Washburn Lake is unfenced for cattle, resulting in conflicts between recreationists and livestock. Fencing and placing a cattle guard in this parking and camping area would keep livestock out and allow for further recreation improvements to be made. Improving directional signing off the main Loomis-Oroville road would allow for better public access to the BLM managed area.

Description of Alternatives

Two alternatives were considered: Alternative 1 (Proposed Action) and Alternative 2 (No Action). A description of each alternative is provided below.

Alternative 1 - Proposed Action

The proposed action is to improve the roads by protecting the ends of the culverts; placing additional gravel as needed for road junctions, water control, turnouts, and wet areas; and raising the cattle guards above the level of additional gravel. Gates and cattle guards will be signed as needed. Heavy metal gates will be installed in approximately four locations to prevent unauthorized vehicle access. The north road (road 7819027R0000) will be repaired and surfaced with gravel, from the corral junction to a location near the existing fence line, approximately 0.5 miles to the north. At that point, the road would be gated and a small, four-car parking area/turnaround would be created.

Proposed recreational improvements include additional gravel on the road, fencing, and a cattle guard at the parking/camping area above the lake. Picnic tables, fire grills, and vehicle barriers would also be placed in this area. Improvements located at Washburn Lake The existing vehicle barrier above the lake would be improved and extended. Simple directional signing would be added along the Loomis-Oroville highway and, as needed throughout the Washburn Lake/Palmer Mountain area to provide better directional access for visitors.

Project Design Features

A BLM class III cultural resources inventory will be conducted in the area of potential effect prior to project implementation. If historically significant resources, traditional cultural properties or sacred areas are identified, the project will be redesigned to avoid them. If the sites cannot be avoided, consultation with Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP), consulting tribes, and interested public will be conducted.

If significant paleontological resources are located prior to or during project implementation, the project will be redesigned to avoid the resource. If the resource cannot be avoided, the locality will be evaluated and mitigation will be conducted. If any cultural or paleontological resources are encountered during project implementation, the disturbing activity will be halted and a BLM archaeologist will be notified for appropriate action.

If any wildlife species that are sensitive to noise or disturbances are found, project activities would be modified to minimize or avoid disturbance.

The areas potentially affected by the proposed activity will be surveyed prior to project initiation. If special status plants are found, project effects will be assessed. Projects may need to be altered to protect plant populations.

To mitigate for noxious weeds, disturbed ground will be seeded with an appropriate seed mix and monitored for noxious weed invasion and treated as needed.

Alternative 2 - No Action

No road or recreation improvements would be proposed for the Washburn Lake/Palmer Mountain area.

Affected Environment

Vegetation/Plant Communities, Including Special Status Plant Species

The project area is on the slopes and flats of the south face of Palmer Mountain. Several plant communities are found here including: ponderosa pine-Douglas fir/bluebunch wheatgrass, ponderosa pine/antelope bitterbrush/bluebunch wheatgrass, quaking aspen/common snowberry and big sagebrush/bluebunch wheatgrass. Riparian vegetation is found where roadwork is planned at stream crossings.

Diffuse knapweed, Russian knapweed, hounds tongue, and Canada thistle are noxious weeds within the project area. Cheatgrass and bulbous bluegrass are common non-native plants in the affected area.

Due to the disturbed nature of the project areas (roadsides, parking lots, culverts etc.), there is a low probability of special status plant occurrence. Project files identify several special status species plant that have potential to occur here.

Riparian/Water Resources/Fisheries

Washburn Lake is a small mid elevation lake of approximately 10 acres. There is one small spring source of water on the north end of the lake. In average to high snowfall years, the lake will fill enough to flow water out the outlet. The lake is 2-4 feet deep across most of its area with the exception of one deep hole 18 feet deep and 150 feet across at the north end of the lake. The shallow areas are filled with bulrush and cattails, which have filled in the shallows since cattle have been excluded. Mallards, ruddy ducks, Barrow's golden-eye, American coots, yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds are seasonally common at the lake.

Washburn Lake has been managed by BLM as a stocked recreational fishery since the road was opened in 1995. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Omak Hatchery has stocked the lake with eastern brook trout every May since the opening. Some years with thick ice and snow cover have resulted in a complete winterkill of the fish. This past October 2001, the hatchery planted 500 experimental tiger trout, which is a sterile cross between brown trout and brook trout.

Terrestrial Wildlife Habitat

The Washburn Lake recreation site and access road are surrounded by mesic shrub-steppe and aspen habitats. Blue and ruffed grouse, northern flickers and red-napped sapsucker, spotted towhees, house wrens, and American robins are conspicuous seasonal residents of the aspen habitats. Western meadowlarks and Brewer's and vesper sparrows are common breeding species in the shrub-steppe. Mule deer are common on Palmer Mountain and their numbers greatly increase during winter and early spring. White-tailed deer are present, but are much less common than mule deer. Sharp-tailed grouse historically occurred on the mountain, but have not

been present since the 1970s. BLM manages habitats on the mountain to maintain suitable habitat for potential re-occupation or introduction of grouse.

Cultural Resources, Native American Values, and Paleontological Resources

The Washburn Lake Road Maintenance Project is located in the area traditionally used by the Okanogan, a Salish-speaking people whose descendants are now members of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. For millennia this and surrounding areas provided important resources for Native American peoples. Their pattern of land use as recorded by ethnographers involved large gatherings to take advantage of the anadromous fish runs in major streams during the spring and summer, dispersal to gather upland plant resources in the summer and hunt game in the fall, and residence in villages in sheltered locations during the winter. Activities in such upland areas as Washburn Lake were primarily extractive, including hunting and plant gathering, which leave few traces on the land. With the possible exception of the actual lake shore, this is an area of low probability for Native American sites.

EuroAmerican exploration and settlement in this area began with fur trading companies and explorers in the early 19th Century. Actual settlement and the beginnings of agriculture occurred around 1860 and were stimulated by discovery of gold in nearby British Columbia slightly later. In 1879 the project area became the Columbia Reservation, created by presidential proclamation for the followers of Chief Moses. Non-native ranchers and miners succeeded in getting a 15-mile wide strip along the International Boundary that contained most of their ranches and mining claims removed from the reservation in 1879. The entire Columbia Reservation was returned to the public domain in 1873. This was followed by an influx of prospectors, some of whom were present and searching for precious metals while still formally excluded from the reservation. They, and the support industries that followed them, gave rise to the first actual towns in the area, including Loomis, the town nearest the project area which began as a trading post in the 15-mile strip. Although none of the mines known for ore production are located in the study area, there is still a high probability of smaller prospect holes occurring there.

Later EuroAmerican settlement was focused primarily on agriculture, including the orchards for which the area is still well known. The remains of a wooden irrigation flume, probably part of the Whitestone system, is still visible at the southern edge of the BLM property but does not extend into the project area.

Paleontological Resources: The probability of paleontological resources in northern Okanogan County has never been seriously investigated, but there is at least one known invertebrate fossil site north of Okanogan. Recent, unpublished paleobotanical research indicates Eocene plant fossils are located near Oroville. Examination of the small amount of rock visible in the study area appears to be too extensively altered by metamorphism to retain distinct fossils.

Previous Surveys: A Class III Cultural Resources Survey of the parking lot, the existing and two proposed gravel quarries, and the road cut proposed for alteration was conducted by a BLM Archaeologist during July and August of 2001 (Cultural Resources Report 130010491). No cultural sites were recorded. Two prospect holes were mentioned.

Recreation

In the past few years, four feet of subbase was placed on the main road at 10-foot width. Other improvements included nine culverts and two cattle guards.

The access road to Washburn Lake is used by the recreating public for horse riding, fishing and hunting access, and general sightseeing. This access road is also used by BLM, grazing lessees, miners, private cabin owners, and one year-round resident. There are no recreation facilities at this site. Two bulletin boards and an entrance sign provide some site information. The majority of use occurs during hunting season. During this period, a number of scattered hunting camps, recreational vehicles, and other vehicles park along the road and in the meadows and aspen thickets along the road. During the year 2000, visitor counters recorded more than 2,000 people visited this site, and in 2001, more than 5,000 people visited this recreation site, according to BLM visitor use numbers (RMIS).

Environmental Impacts

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action): Impacts from the proposed action are expected to be minimal and limited to the existing roadways and the parking/camping area above the lake. Improving the roadway would facilitate management of the public lands by BLM employees for grazing lease management, weed control operations and administrative needs. It would also provide safe and improved access for grazing lessees, miners and the recreating public. By gating off unauthorized roads, and improving the main road, the public would be encouraged to stay on the main road, reducing vehicle impacts in other areas.

Fencing the parking/camping area above Washburn Lake would reduce recreation and livestock conflicts. It would also prevent vehicle access to the lake. The new parking area and gate location along the north road (road 7819027R0000) would reduce BLM management difficulties from people driving around the barriers at the corral. Placing the gate in or near the existing fence line and creating a small parking area would create a more manageable situation for keeping the rest of road 7819027R0000 closed to motorized vehicles.

Providing road and recreational improvements and additional directional signing is expected to draw additional visitors to this area, and have attendant impacts to wildlife and plant impacts associated with habitat disturbance. Use would be on existing roads and trails in the area however, so impacts would be limited. In addition, the additional signing would prevent visitors from getting lost and from inadvertently trespassing onto nearby private land.

Soil displacement and vegetative disturbance is expected during road and recreational improvements, but is not expected to degrade any sensitive resources in the area.

Under Alternative 1, relatively little habitat would be affected since most proposed actions propose to modify existing facilities. The most impacts would be increased visitor use especially at areas, such as Washburn Lake, that attract the most users. If visitors remain on existing roads and trails, disturbance would be similar to existing conditions. If people create a network of trails, however, their activities would disturb habitat over an extended area, which would have potential to displace more wildlife. These effects would occur primarily during the fishing and hunting seasons. Increased use of the lake by fishermen in boats and float-tubes would also have

proportionately greater effects on waterfowl and marsh birds. Wildlife may eventually adjust to human activities in the area, diminishing the degree of disturbance from human presence.

No special status species would be affected. However, if sharp-tailed grouse are discovered or become reestablished on Palmer Mountain, they would be more susceptible to accidental take during upland bird hunting season.

This alternative is not expected to impact historically significant cultural resources given provisions for cultural inventory of the area of potential effect prior to project implementation and proposed avoidance of cultural resources through project re-design.

Alternative 2: Under this alternative, the Washburn Lake/Palmer Mountain area would remain in its current condition. No road or recreation improvements would be implemented. Due to poor road conditions and vehicles being able to drive around barriers into closed areas, additional unauthorized vehicle routes would form over time, complicating BLM management of the site and affecting the plant, wildlife and visual resources of the area. In addition, erosion, weed infestations and fire hazard would increase. Livestock conflicts would continue to occur in the parking/camping area above Washburn Lake.

This alternative is not expected to impact any cultural or paleontological resources.

Other Resource Elements Considered in the Analysis

Grazing Use: NEED, people/grazing conflicts: The area around Washburn Lake is leased for grazing from April 15 to October 31. The cattle in the allotment are rotated through seven pastures and typically graze for a month in the pasture that contains the project area. Cattle are planned to be in the project area from mid-May to mid-June in 2002.

The project will have minimal effect on livestock grazing. The area being excluded from grazing is too small to have a significant effect on forage availability. The proposed fence design should not interfere with cattle movement in the pasture.

Environmental Justice: There would be no disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects on minority or low-income populations as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

Other Values: The following resources were considered in this analysis, but determined to be either not present or not expected to be impacted: air quality, prime or unique farmlands, special areas, wilderness, wastes (hazardous or solid), floodplain, and wild and scenic rivers. The proposed action would not adversely impact energy and minerals resources or their development.

Coordination with Other Agencies, Groups and Individuals

The proposed project was coordinated with input from the following BLM specialists:

- Kevin Kane - Botanist, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Richard Bailey - Archaeologist, Spokane District
- Dana Peterson - Range Management Specialist, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Diane Priebe - Recreation Planner, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Neal Hedges - Wildlife Biologist, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Joe Kelly - Fisheries Biologist, Spokane District- Wenatchee Resource Area
- Brent Cunderla - Geologist, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Kathy Helm - Planning and Environmental Coordinator, Spokane District
- Gene Wehmeyer- Operations, Wenatchee Resource Area
- Madilane Perry – Archaeologist, Spokane District

Consultation

Consultation was initiated with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, and the Okanogan County Historical Society by letters dated August 3, 2001 and April 30, 2002.

Other Outreach

The EA will be placed on the Spokane District web page at www.or.blm.gov/spokane for public review with a 2-week comment period, to end May 24. In addition, a copy of the EA will be sent to the Okanogan County Department of Public Works for their information.